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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISLAMABAD 002226

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2018
TAGS: PGOV PK PREL PTER
SUBJECT: KIDNAPPING, RELEASE OF CHRISTIAN GROUP

Classified By: Ambassador Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Unidentified militants kidnapped an estimated 25-32 Christian men and boys in Peshawar on 21 June and released them in the early morning of 22 June. While the incident is part of a widening deterioration in security in the Northwest Frontier Province, it also demonstrates the continued vulnerability of religious minorities. End Summary.

Hostages Taken and Released

¶12. (C) Unidentified militants kidnapped an estimated 25-32 Christian men and boys on 21 June in Peshawar, according to Bishop Manoo Rumalshah of St. John's Anglican Church. The secretary of the diocese and local press confirmed in the early morning of 22 June the captors had released all Christian hostages. One Muslim man taken with the Christians remains missing. Local press reported he had rented out the building, which was a former madrassa, to the Christians. He reportedly remains in the militants' custody.

¶13. (U) One press account stated eyewitnesses identified the kidnappers as militants associated with Mangal Bagh, leader of Lashkari-Islami (LI), a criminal gang with loose ties to terrorists that threatens Peshawar residents. The kidnappers arrived at a non-denominational Christian celebration at roughly 10:00 pm and rounded up the men and boys.

¶14. (U) The identity, number of the kidnappers, and the details of the hostages' release remain unconfirmed. Local press reported the political authorities in the Bara subdivision of the Khyber Agency received the freed hostages after police contacted the captors.

¶15. (U) In a follow up press account on 24 June, LI's local amir stated LI intended to find and punish those involved and attributed the kidnapping to a misunderstanding.

¶16. (C) The kidnapping prompted government officials to suspend the local police chief and some of his staff, according to local RSO contacts and press reports. Bishop Rumalshah offered three overlapping motivations for the kidnapping: a property dispute involving the location, the locations' former use as a madrassa, and a desire to scare Christians to leave the area. The LI amir claimed the kidnapping occurred because militants reacted to a tip that Christians were engaging in immoral behavior.

¶7. (U) This is the first incident of Christians kidnapped in Peshawar that Embassy recalls. Militants kidnapped a Pakistani Christian physician near Tank in December, but released him after several weeks without serious harm.

¶8. (C) Rehman Malik, senior advisor to Pakistan People's Party co-chair Asif Ali Zardari, took credit for the hostages' safe release and told the Ambassador he ordered their rescue. Malik claimed the Christians were drunk at the time of their capture and attributed the kidnapping to the Taliban.

¶9. (SBU) Comment: Christians, particularly poor ones, remain an easy target for militants across the NWFP. This kidnapping highlights the declining security situation.

PATTERSON